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Two engineer Soldiers receive Purple Heart

Story and photos by Spc. Jake Judge
363rd MPAD

CAMP LIBERTY, Iraq – *“The General, ever desirous to cherish virtuous ambition in his Soldiers, as well as to foster and encourage every species of Military merit, directs that whenever any singularly meritorious action is performed, the author of it shall be permitted to wear on his facing over the left breast, the figure of a heart in purple ... not only instances of unusual gallantry, but also of extraordinary fidelity and essential service in any way shall meet with a due reward.”* — General George Washington.

The Purple Heart, established during the Revolutionary War in Newburgh, N.Y. August 7, 1782, by the first United States President, Gen. George Washington, is the United States Armed Service’s oldest, and one of its most prestigious, awards.

Pfc. Eric LaBarge, a truck driver and a Fulton, N.Y., native, and Sgt. John Cantu, a truck driver, who hails from Corpus Christi, Texas, both serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom with the 68th Engineer Company, 62nd Engineer Battalion, 16th Engineer

Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, joined the 200 year-plus heritage of brave men and women June 16 who have been so honored.

LaBarge and Cantu were wounded on the same mission January 26 when a 20-ton dump truck driven by LaBarge was struck by an improvised explosive device. The Soldiers were in the process of moving limestone to Forward Operating Base St. Michael, in Mahmudiyah, where LaBarge was assisting the 68th Combat Support Equipment Company with reconstruction of a road to better the quality of life for Soldiers living on the FOB.

“I feel honored for receiving the Purple Heart,” said LaBarge.

“Sgt. Cantu is the ultimate professional,” commented 1st Lt. Joseph Stahl, executive officer, 68th Eng. Co. “He encouraged his (fellow) Soldier to complete the mission despite both of them being wounded and the truck partially disabled. He was back leading his squad later the same month and has been an instrumental part in the success of numerous missions since,” continued Stahl. “Sgt. Cantu does not seek attention or recognition but quietly drives on with his fellow Soldiers.”

LaBarge and Cantu returned to the unit to continue their mission as truck drivers for the balance of their deployment to Iraq.

Cantu returned to duty the first week of February. Labarge was treated a number of times at medical facilities for the injuries he received in the IED blast and was restricted to limited duty for several months. He returned to full duty with his squad in May.

The Purple Heart was presented to the Soldiers by Lt. Col John Boule, 62nd Eng. Bn., and Command Sgt. Maj. Richard St. Cyr.

Brig. Gen. Robin Timmons, 16th Eng. Bde., Command Sgt. Maj. Victor Riley and Capt. Robert Kimmel, commander of the 68th CSE, also attended the ceremony with several honored guests.

The Purple Heart is awarded in the name of the President to any member of the Armed Forces of the United States who, “while serving under the competent authority in any capacity with one of the Armed Forces, who has been wounded or killed, or may hereafter die after being wounded” in any action against an enemy of the United States.



Pinning the P.H.

CAMP LIBERTY, Iraq – Lt. Col. John Boule, 62nd Engineer Battalion, 16th Engineer Brigade, Multi-National Division – Baghdad, pins the Purple Heart medal on Sgt. John Cantu, a native of Corpus Christi, Texas, who serves with the 68th Engineer Company, 62nd Eng. Bn. Cantu was awarded the Purple Heart on June 16th in a ceremony at the 62nd Eng. Bn. Headquarters. Cantu was wounded in action January 26 when his 20-ton dump truck was struck by an improvised-explosive device while delivering limestone to Forward Observation Base St. Michael in Mahmudiyah.

(U.S. Army photo by Spc. Jake Judge, 363rd MPAD.)



Shaking hands with Riley

CAMP LIBERTY, Iraq – Sgt. John Cantu, a Corpus Christi, Texas, native, who serves with the 68th Engineer Company, 62nd Engineer Battalion, 16th Engineer Brigade, Multi-National Division – Baghdad, shakes hands with Command Sgt. Maj. Victor Riley, 16th Engineer Bde., after being presented the Purple Heart medal June 16. Riley was one of three guests of honor present to congratulate the Purple Heart recipients.

(U.S. Army photo by Spc. Jake Judge, 363rd MPAD.)



LaBarge and Riley.

CAMP LIBERTY, Iraq – Pfc. Eric LaBarge, a Fulton, N.Y. native, who serves with the 68th Engineer Company, 62nd Engineer Battalion, 16th Engineer Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, shakes hands with Command Sgt. Maj. Victor Riley, 16th Engineer Brigade, Multi-National Division – Baghdad, in a ceremony June 16 after being presented the Purple Heart medal. LaBarge was presented with the medal following combat operations January 26 when his 20-ton dump truck was struck by an improvised-explosive device while delivering limestone to Forward Operation Base St. Michael in Mahmudiyah.

(U.S. Army photo by Spc. Jake Judge, 363rd MPAD.)



LaBarge.

CAMP LIBERTY, Iraq – Pfc. Eric LaBarge, a Fulton, N.Y. native, who serves with the 68th Engineer Company, 62nd Engineer Battalion, 16th Engineer Brigade, Multi-National Division – Baghdad, is recognized for being wounded in action on January 26. LaBarge was driving his 20-ton dump truck delivering limestone to Forward Operation Base St. Michael, Mahmudiyah, when the vehicle he and Sgt. John Cantu, a Corpus Christi native, also with the 62nd En. Bn., were it was struck by an improvised-explosive device. LaBarge was presented the Purple Heart medal in a ceremony at the 62nd En. Bn. Headquarters June 16.

(U.S. Army photo by Spc. Jake Judge, 363rd MPAD.)